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SUBJECT: GOB PROMOTES MODERATION THROUGH ISLAMIC OUTREACH,
CIVIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The Bahraini government is in the process of launching two programs emphasizing moderation in public discourse and interactions. Ministry of Islamic Affairs Under Secretary Dr. Fareed Al Muftah told the Embassy that he was reaching out to Bahrain's citizens to ensure they were not infected by growing "aggression and violence" in the teachings of some Islamic scholars. By organizing lectures, seminars, and conferences, the Ministry can promote the concepts of tolerance, acceptance and modernity. Al Muftah said he would welcome USG assistance in support of his program. Ministry of Education official Khalid Al Khaja told us that he is working with Arab Civitas on a civic education curriculum for Bahrain's primary and secondary public schools that focuses on the constitution, separation of powers, women and children's rights, role of civil society, and human rights. Target date for implementation is January 2006. Al Khaja emphasized that the curriculum could draw from outside sources but must be a "very local project." He hinted that the Ministry would be open to ideas on how the USG could provide indirect funding for the program. These initiatives reflect growing GOB concern that public discourse is developing in an increasingly divisive way, and the government, through its power in the mosques and schools, is trying to exert leadership in determining the outcome of the debate. End Summary.

Pending Off Outside Ideas About Islam

2. (SBU) Newly-appointed Ministry of Islamic Affairs Under Secretary Dr. Fareed Al Muftah told PolEcon chief March 22

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that he was concerned about growing "aggression and violence" in the religious discourse used by some Arab Muslims in the region. He said that Bahrainis are "calm and peaceful" people, but outside ideologies claiming to reflect the true path of Islam could infect them. As a result, Al Muftah decided to launch an awareness and education campaign to demonstrate for Bahrainis that Islam's message is one of moderation and peace. (Bio Note: Al Muftah received his Ph.D. in Islamic studies from a university in Scotland and professed a love of American television and films. End Note.)

"Ijtihad" to Modernize Islam

3. (SBU) Al Muftah said that the Ministry was organizing lectures, seminars and conferences featuring Bahraini and other Arab and Muslim scholars focusing on themes of tolerance, acceptance, and modernity. The Islamic concept of "ijtihad," or religious interpretation, requires that Muslims adopt a forward-looking philosophy incorporating international and technological developments into the practice of their religion. In contrast with those who call for a return to Islam's golden age from the time of the Prophet Mohammed, Al Muftah believes that 90 percent of today's Islam should be open for interpretation within the framework of the Qur'an and the Sunna and Hadith, which describe Mohammed's life and practices, and only 10 percent based on a more rigid, literal reading of the holy books.

4. (SBU) As an example of his openness to modernity and technology, he stated that his wife, a teacher in a Bahraini public school, was a firm supporter of the U.S. GLOBE program focusing on environmental education and use of technology. He said she would travel to Lebanon shortly to participate in a GLOBE conference. (Note: This story was illuminating for several reasons. Traditional Muslim men often do not speak directly about their wives, instead referring to their "families." That his wife works outside the home and travels without him is unusual for a devout senior religious scholar. End Note.)

Advocating Contact with Non-Muslim Religious Scholars

15. (SBU) Al Muftah advocates contact with the outside, non-Muslim world, and recalled a conference held in Bahrain a few years earlier that included non-Arab Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious scholars. Although he has no specific plans, he thought that holding a similar conference now could be beneficial.

16. (SBU) Al Muftah welcomed any USG programming or support for his mission to promote moderate religious discourse in Bahrain. He suggested study tours for Bahraini clerics in the U.S., USG-sponsored visits to Bahrain by speakers and experts on religion and Islam in America, and interfaith conferences, all of which would promote person-to-person contact.

Developing Civic Education Curriculum

17. (SBU) On March 22, APAO met with Khalid Al Khaja, Ministry of Education Senior Specialist in Social Studies and a recent International Visitors Program participant, to discuss the March 13 Cabinet approval of a Council of Representatives (COR) proposal to teach human rights and democracy at Bahrain's public schools. Al Khaja is responsible for the implementation of civic education in Bahraini primary and secondary public schools and is working with Arab Civitas, a MEPI education pillar implementer, on the curriculum. He noted that MoE is coordinating with Arab Civitas on training teachers and developing materials in support of the civic education program. The new curriculum will focus on the constitution, separation of powers, women and children's rights, role of civil society, and human rights. Al Khaja acknowledged a previous Royal Decree, from fall 2004, mandating that political studies be taught at the university level, but admitted that the Ministry had not yet begun to address this project.

18. (SBU) Al Khaja said that teaching civic education in public schools is not new in Bahrain. From 1977-1991 civic education was taught in public school classrooms. In the early 1990s civic education was merged with social studies, and was eventually dissolved from the public school curriculum. He did not directly comment on the reason for dissolving the program, but noted that this occurred during a time of political strife in Bahrain. The current efforts to bring civic education to the classroom are not viewed as groundbreaking by some. Rather, they are seen as a return to the pre-conflict status quo.

Program to Reflect Bahraini Values

19. (SBU) The civic education program will be developed in a way that is "suitable for Bahrain." Al Khaja stressed that Bahrain would not adopt civic education models from other Arab nations. He admitted that GOB officials involved in civic education could benefit from the various training opportunities that exist in the region as well as from Arabic literature created on the topic. However, civic education will remain "a very local project." The Ministry is reviewing books on civic education to ensure that they adhere to Bahraini culture and customs. The fact that the books are in Arabic is not enough. They must reflect a local flavor. Al Khaja is hopeful that civic education will be implemented in the classroom by January 2006. However, he warned that the program is currently facing financial difficulties because of the fear on the part of the Ministry to accept foreign funding directly. Al Khaja hinted that the Minister would be open to ideas on how to fund the program indirectly, without money being exchanged with the Ministry.

110. (SBU) Turning to the COR proposal, Al Khaja said that the Ministry's vision is to teach human rights and democracy in primary schools in a broad context rather than as individual subjects. For example, children's rights can be taught in the context of family values and issues. Civic responsibility can be taught in the context of community service.

Comment

111. (C) The outreach program by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the plan to teach civic education in public schools reflect the government's desire to reinforce Bahrain's traditional openness and moderation. Many Bahrainis perceive that public discourse is developing in an increasingly divisive way, and the government, through its power in the mosques and schools, is trying to determine the outcome of the debate. That said, there are some within the

Ministry of Education who believe that implementing the "new" civic education curriculum could raise difficult questions among young students about sectarianism and could conflict with traditional family values. We believe there is an opportunity for MEPI and other USG programs to support these initiatives. We will develop our ideas and welcome Washington's input on possible next steps.

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